

Barbara Barrett, *McClatchy Newspapers*

WASHINGTON - The Minnesota Democrat who's out to get rid of the Pentagon's sponsorships for NASCAR teams says she won't back away from her efforts and, despite GOP resistance, will broaden her fight to repeal tax breaks for track owners, too.

Rep. Betty McCollum says her work could save American taxpayers tens of millions of dollars. But Defense Department officials and lawmakers from NASCAR country say the sponsorships help military recruitment, and that the tax breaks could save jobs in the struggling economy.

In an interview Friday, McCollum said it doesn't make sense to keep the benefits for NASCAR teams and track owners when other cuts are being made to community health care, programs for homeless veterans and Head Start.

"I started to look what is in this large defense budget to see what's not related to security that we could redirect to critical supplies or mission support," she said. "Or in the case of racetrack owners, what are some of the special tax perks that some of the special interests are getting?"

She plans to file legislation to prohibit Pentagon sponsorships of dragsters, Indy cars, stock cars and motorcycle racing, affecting just about every level of motorsports.

"We should take a critical eye and a critical look and say, 'Is this an appropriate role for the government?'" McCollum said.

McCollum filed an amendment this month to prohibit the Defense Department from spending money to sponsor NASCAR teams, saying it's a poor use of money given the other cuts the House was making. The amendment came as the House, led by Republicans, spent days wrestling with \$60 billion in cuts to the current fiscal year's budget.

In the days before the vote, her office logged angry calls from across NASCAR country. "There were some people that were very upset," McCollum said.

She also received a threatening and racist fax, which received widespread media attention and is being investigated by the U.S. Capitol Police. But her chief of staff said the office also received a lot of calls from tea party supporters who backed McCollum's amendment.

Her amendment failed, 281-148.

Meanwhile, racetrack owners received tax breaks worth \$45 million in 2010 and 2011, aimed at helping them make improvements to their facilities. A two-year extension of the program was included in the tax cuts compromise that President Barack Obama forged with Congress in December.

McCollum said she'll file legislation to repeal the tax benefit. "It's an earmark," she said.

North Carolina Republican Rep. Patrick McHenry disagrees. His Charlotte-area district is home to half the NASCAR teams. His Twitter avatar last week was the No. 3 logo in memory of legendary driver Dale Earnhardt, who was killed in a crash at the Daytona 500 in 2001.

McHenry spoke against McCollum's amendment a week ago on the House floor and said in an interview this week that her goal didn't seem to be about saving money. He pointed out that her two goals - killing the raceway tax breaks and banning driver sponsorships - are aimed at the same sport.

"She may believe that none of her constituents watch NASCAR, but they do," McHenry said this week. "This shows that she is on the warpath against NASCAR. This is more about her disdain for NASCAR than it really is about saving taxpayers' money."

McCollum insisted, though, that she has nothing against NASCAR.

"This isn't about NASCAR," McCollum said. "I've watched the Indy 500, the Daytona 500. I have friends who are avid fans. . . . This is about making tough choices."